

Considerations For A Homework Policy

Introduction

Homework has long been a mainstay of most school systems. In the recent past however, some critics have been pointing out some flaws that homework has, with some suggesting homework should be practically done away with. Looking at this issue through the lens of current events in California, there is the recent example of the Los Angeles School adopting a new county wide policy that would affect hundreds of thousands of students.

The LA Policy

In June 2011, the Los Angeles Unified School District Implemented a 10% homework policy. The policy stated that homework would not count for more than 10% of a student's grade. The Los Angeles homework policy was originally designed with the concern that some students were testing highly but failing the classes they were testing high in. The homework rules, which did not have to be approved by the Board of Education, went into effect July 1 by administrative order. June 27 of this year saw the first public discussion regarding the policy. The LA Times reported that LAUSD's homework policy drew nationwide attention and swift reaction: from praise to denunciation to confusion (Blume, 7/21/11) .

The LAUSD 10% homework policy has recently been suspended (Huffington Post, 7/21/11).

“The homework rule was originally designed to allow for heavier emphasis on in-class assignments, tests and papers. But the policy was put in place by administrative order and lacked input from the community and Board of Education.

‘We cannot and will not implement a policy of this magnitude without actively soliciting and incorporating recommendations from our constituencies,’” John Deasy, LA Unified School District Superintendent said in a statement the *Los Angeles Daily News* reports.

The measure lacked adequate amount of input from the community. Obviously there was not a consensus for this in the district.

The 10% cap was developed by Chief Academic Officer Judy Elliott under then-Supt. Ramon C. Cortines, who retired in April. The policy has now been suspended and the current superintendent Deasy expects a new policy to be drafted and reviewed for submission for the 2012-2013 school year.

The example of the LA school district debating about and wrestling with the homework policy and currently not being exactly sure what to do, raises some interesting questions. What should homework’s role be in a student’s life? Does homework help? And, how much homework should we give?

In the LA example, the theory of how to treat grades was that 90% of a student’s grade would have been based on such measures as class assignments, tests and essays. There were some abnormalities such as some students doing well on CSTs but failing their class. The homework policy was an attempt to address this problem as well as putting the emphasis strongly on in-class work. However, the LA policy lacked research and community input these were two reasons cited for repealing the policy.

Some other cities have developed homework policies through a public process. In Davis, Calif., for example, officials established a public homework committee that met over a year's

span. The committee's website included published meeting agendas and minutes, a 144-page report, relevant board policies and administrative regulations.

Davis, CA: A Case Study

The Davis School District commissioned a 144 page report to analyze and lay out their homework plan.

“No recommendation regarding this multidimensional topic will ever be perfect because research provides few clear guidelines. Classrooms are dynamic environments, and homes are even more complex. Quality research is frequently contradictory as a result of the variables inherent in the study questions. It’s no wonder studying the impact of schoolwork that takes place in diverse home settings is fraught with complications.

We found that there are more questions than answers about the benefits of homework. Studies do not encompass the total child. For example, researchers target achievement in the absence of methodologies that adequately assess learning. Unfortunately, the love of learning can be forgotten in the debate.”

One major area that lacked research had to do with the differences in performance between children who come from more advantaged homes and those who were less advantaged but attended schools that provided options to support them such as after-school tutoring and study halls, etc. We must consider how we provide resources to and which students have access to resources when developing programs. The Davis report suggests that the educational community has a responsibility to provide equitable resources for less advantaged whenever possible since, “homework has not been shown to have a positive influence on students who fall into the achievement gap.”

The report goes on to say that the committee did not reach a consensus on their opinions but that, “...it is safe to say that among us, there is more agreement than disagreement.”

Looking at the LA and Davis examples through some psychological theory, the work of Maslow and specifically his hierarchy of needs jumps out at me. The Davis report seems to suggest that one of the problems in implementing a district wide homework policy is that each student's hierarchy of needs is being met to a different degree. Meeting student's deficiency needs is vital to make sure they are learning (Eggen, Kauchak, 2011, p. 247). However, it is difficult if not impossible for the school or teachers to make sure that is the case when students are home. This disparity of each student having different deficiency needs met in order to satisfy an environment for growth needs is one of the difficult aspects of implementing policy.

However, when we continue along this line of thinking, we get to self-determination. Self-determination theory assumes that people have three innate psychological needs: *competence, autonomy, and relatedness* (Eggen, Kauchak, 2011, p. 247). People have the need to be competent and homework can be a perfect way to reinforce or show students how they can become more competent. Students also have a need for relatedness which is something that homework needs to have if it is to be effective. We will talk about the need and how to address relatedness later in this paper.

Alfie Kohn & Brain Theory

In "Rethinking Homework" by Alfie Kohn, the long time critic of homework outlines some problems and solutions to rethinking and implementing a new paradigm for how we administer homework. In the book, Kohn states:

- 1. The negative effects of homework are well known.**
- 2. The positive effects of homework are largely mythical.**
- 3. More homework is being piled on children despite the absence of its value.**

“In preparation for a book on the topic, I’ve spent a lot of time sifting through the research. The results are nothing short of stunning. For starters, there is absolutely no evidence of any academic benefit from assigning homework in elementary or middle school. For younger students, in fact, there isn’t even a *correlation* between whether children do homework (or how much they do) and any meaningful measure of achievement. At the high school level, the correlation is weak and tends to disappear when more sophisticated statistical measures are applied. Meanwhile, no study has ever substantiated the belief that homework builds character or teaches good study habits.”

In the section, “suggestions for a principal,” Kohn suggests the following nine points for teachers and principals to follow when thinking about homework:

1. Educate yourself and share what you’ve learned with teachers, parents, and central office administrators.
2. Rethink standardized “homework policies.”
3. Reduce the amount – but don’t stop there.
4. Change the default.
5. Ask the kids.
6. Suggest that teachers assign only what they design.
7. Use homework as an opportunity to involve students in decision-making.
8. Help teachers move away from grading.
9. Experiment.

While I disagree with some of what Kohn suggests, for this short an exploration of his work, I want to focus on what I agree with and what is supported by educational and cognitive research and theory.

“Most of what homework is doing is driving kids *away* from learning,” says education professor Harvey Daniels. Kohn points out that kids dread homework and see it as some that has to be gotten through. He suggests that, “even if (homework) did provide other benefits, they

would have to be weighed against its likely effect on kids' love of learning." Now this is an important point but it is more complicated than he makes it seem. Kids generally don't like homework and they generally don't like vegetables. A lot of children view eating vegetables as something to be gotten through. But it doesn't mean that eating vegetables is bad for them, quite the opposite. Perhaps it is the parents job to show the child the importance of vegetables. Just because students don't want to do something doesn't mean it's not in their best interest. Students don't want to come to school, but we make them go to school anyway. If kids were left totally to their own devices they would probably spend the day playing video games and eating ice cream. Children, by nature, need to be trained to a certain extent to be ready for life outside of school when they will have to be disciplined do things they probably don't want to do, and generally be well adjusted mature adults.

Kohn suggests that we, "Reduce the amount – but don't stop there." He points out how any parents are upset with how much time their children have to spend on homework. Some assignments, he argues, are not worth the students' time. The idea is that from first to twelfth grade students are doing too much busy work. He cites needless worksheets and boring textbooks. He wants the philosophy behind homework to address questions such as, "Does it seem to assume that children are meaning makers -- or empty vessels? Is learning regarded as a process that's mostly active or passive? Is it about wrestling with ideas or mindlessly following directions?"

He also supports student choice. In point number 5 he says, "Ask the kids. Find out what students think of homework and solicit their suggestions – perhaps by distributing anonymous questionnaires. Do students find that homework really is useful? Why or why not?"

Are certain kinds better than others? How does homework affect their *desire* to learn? What are its other effects on their lives, and on their families?" These questions are important and useful. I agree that getting feedback and on a larger scale, researching what works for students and getting opinions from actual students can really help to make homework more efficient and effective.

Kohn also argues that it rarely makes sense to give the same assignment to all students in a class because it's unlikely to be beneficial for most of them. "On those days when homework really seems necessary, teachers should create several assignments fitted to different interests and capabilities. *But it's better to give no homework to anyone than the same homework to everyone* (Italics added) (Kohn, 2007)."

This is exactly the kind of argument that makes Alfie Kohn such a volatile character in the field of educational theory. It's hard to back up all of his claims with theory, but some work well with theory. But ideas such as the same homework for everyone is worse than no homework is extreme and shows Kohn's extreme and exclusionary theories.

Applying Brain Theory, Data, and Making Suggestions

In a research paper by Harris Cooper, he sets out a table of some pros and cons of homework. I have decided to include his list because it makes sense and I think it's a good example. I have included my own list based on the theory researched in the textbook and the research done for this paper.

Cooper defines homework as "tasks assigned to students by school teachers that are meant to be carried out during non-school hours" (Cooper, 1989, 7). Omitted in this definition are:

- a. in-school guided study,
- b. home study courses, and
- c. extracurricular activities, such as sports or student newspapers.

Table 1. Suggested Effects of Homework	
Positive Effects	Negative Effects
<i>Immediate achievement and learning</i> Better retention of factual knowledge Increased understanding Better critical thinking, concept formation, information processing Curriculum enrichment	<i>Satiation</i> Loss of interest in academic material Physical and emotional fatigue
<i>Long-term academic</i> Learning encouraged during leisure time Improved attitude toward school Better study habits and skills	<i>Denial of access to leisure time and community activities</i> Parental interference Pressure to complete and perform well Confusion of instructional techniques
<i>Nonacademic</i> Greater self-direction Greater self-discipline Better time organization More inquisitiveness More independent problem solving	<i>Cheating</i> Copying from other students Help beyond tutoring
<i>Greater parental appreciation of and involvement in schooling</i>	<i>Increased differences between high and low achievers</i>

<http://www.cehd.umn.edu/carei/reports/Rpractice/Summer94/homework.html>

My own list of the Pros and Cons of homework looks like this:

Pros

- Homework frees up class time which allows for more work to be done in class
- Students have more time to construct, review, and edit work such as essay assignments if done as homework as opposed to the limited time the classroom allows
- Homework prepares students for higher education since many university level courses require an extensive amount of homework

Cons

- Some students have after school jobs and have limited time outside of class for homework.
- Different students have different resources available which may create an unfair competitive environment
- Research in the LA school district has shown that a number of students have performed well on state standardized tests while they are failing the class being tested

Analysis

Thinking about homework from a Piagetian viewpoint, homework could be both beneficial and detrimental to the drive for equilibrium. Homework needs to be compatible with Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences. Homework needs to be more like a game. This demands more creative homework solutions. Teachers can use the technological advances of the internet and other platforms to make content more interesting for students. The homework needs to be engaging effective and serve a purpose. If the homework isn't operating in this fashion, then homework should be given, as Kohn would suggest.

There are many aspects of brain theory which may have some connection to homework. The brain theory that I believe has the greatest effect on homework is operant conditioning. B.F.

Skinner argued that behaviors are controlled more by consequences than by stimuli preceding behaviors (Eggen, Kauchak, 2011, p. 109). According to this theory, if students feel some sort of cognitive development or if they respond to the material in a positive way and they see positive results in learning they will condition themselves to respond to the activity. Also, if they see negative results to not doing an activity, they will likely choose to do the activity. A good model for this might be practice for a team. A player might not like to practice but he knows that if he doesn't practice he will not play in the game, so although the player does not wish to practice, the consequences of not practicing are not worth it. In turn the player by practicing and playing in the games becomes a better player. If we as teachers don't show any reason for practicing, our students will have less or no reason to put in the effort.

If a student sees a direct correlation between the homework she does and the focus of the classroom, the student will see a reason for doing the work. Also, as with a team as in the previous analogy, if a student is able to work with other students on their homework, they will benefit from each other pushing each other to do the work. I saw examples of this on the Edutopia site. Students were involved after school hours creating pieces about things such as homelessness and women's rights. Since they were working in a group and their homework directly related in a real and tangible way back to the subject they were studying in class. The students had a real and obvious connection between their homework and what they were learning. These examples also included student choice, collaboration, creativity, and multiple intelligence theory. I believe it is no coincidence that the results were positive.

I agree with Alfie Kohn that the amount of homework should be reduced and homework should be given when necessary. Schools can have a policy where teachers, instead of having a limit on how much percent homework should count but a limit on how many days a week students get homework. Maybe two or three day limit. This daily limit could be used in concert with a percentage limit that I would suggest being higher than 10% if necessary. This ten percent limit looks more ridiculous when we look at how homework might prepare our students for higher education.

Higher Education and Homework

Universities courses demand a great deal of studying outside of the classroom. Many University courses grade solely on work done outside the classroom, such as essays, research papers, and projects. Studying and homework should, and often do, go hand in hand. A de-emphasis on homework may also likely de-emphasize studying. No American Universities have instituted policies that limit how much work outside the classroom can count towards a student's grade.

Our highest goals as educators, especially at the secondary level, should be to encourage and prepare our students for higher education. The primary concern when deciding to develop a homework policy should be the effect it will have on students' preparation for college level courses.

If by drastically changing the homework policy, we are in some way putting our students in a situation where they are going to be worse off in their college level courses, then we are doing a great disservice to them and causing quite a blunder.

Conclusion

Homework is a very complicated matter. As the LA and Davis examples showed, there seems to be more confusion than certainty when it comes to homework. Problems arising from different socioeconomic issues to simply not enough research or conflicting research on the subject makes it difficult to come up with easy answers. Vocal and influential critics such as Alfie Kohn are advocating for extreme change in this area.

When drafting a homework policy, it is clear to this researcher that brain theory which drives successful utilization of learning should be prominent. Even theory such as operant condition which some theorists such as Kohn might disagree with, needs to be included. Just as importantly, the community needs to have a voice in such an important educational policy. There needs to be more research done in the field as well. Also, students need to be included in the homework process and the use of technology in homework needs to be addressed and utilized. Finally, since we as secondary teachers, especially at the high school level should be trying to prepare our students for college level courses, it seems most beneficial for more schools to model their homework policy, and more generally, their policy of work outside the classroom towards that of a university setting.

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